Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages | Commissariat aux langues officielles

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Restructuring of the Canadian airline industry: the Commissioner of Official Languages takes action to ensure that the linguistic rights of Canadians are respected

The Commissioner of Official Languages, Dr. Dyane Adam, appeared today before the House Standing Committee on Transport to present her recommendations with regard to complying with the *Official Languages Act* and the future of the airline industry in Canada.

The process of restructuring the airline industry cannot be considered in isolation from one of the fundamental values of Canadian identity: linguistic duality. The Commissioner was therefore pleased to hear Minister Collenette's recent statement that the government will ensure that the *Official Languages Act* will continue to apply to Air Canada or a future dominant carrier. Dr. Adam believes however that the government should go one step further and clarify the linguistic obligations of affiliated regional carriers and ensure that they accord the two official languages full equality in providing services to the public. Air Canada has always maintained that its regional carriers are not subject to the *Official Languages Act* and are not required to provide services to the public in both official languages. Following repeated negotiations with the corporation, the Office of the Commissioner had to make a request in 1997 to have this matter referred to the Federal Court and this issue has not yet been resolved.

The Commissioner reminded the Committee that Air Canada, which was privatized in 1988, and in particular, its regional carriers, account for nearly 15% of the complaints received each year by her office. "These complaints bear eloquent witness to the degree of importance that the Canadian public attaches to receiving service in the official language of their choice", the Commissioner stated.

"It is hard for average citizens to understand why, after buying an Air Canada ticket to fly from Halifax to North Bay, they have the right to use their preferred official language at Halifax airport, but not on the Air Nova flight (a wholly-owned Air Canada subsidiary) between Halifax and Montreal. At Dorval Airport, they can again exercise the right to use the official language of their choice, but only until they reach Toronto. When they leave Lester B. Pearson Airport via Air Ontario (also a wholly-owned Air Canada subsidiary), their linguistic rights vanish into thin air. With any luck, they can be claimed again in North Bay with their luggage. We are convinced that after the current restructuring process, citizens may witness an even greater erosion of their linguistic rights in the airline industry", declared Dr. Adam.

The government thus has a specific responsibility to clarify the linguistic obligations of affiliated regional carriers, on the ground and in the air. The Commissioner is therefore taking immediate action and proposing that the bill soon to be tabled by the government include provisions to protect the right of Canadians to receive services in both official languages.

This provision would ensure that the *Official Languages Act* would continue to apply in its entirety to Air Canada, regardless of its new structure, or to any future dominant carrier. The obligations of regional carriers affiliated with the dominant carrier would essentially involve providing bilingual services to the

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public. If an individual feels that his rights have been infringed upon, he would be entitled to file a complaint with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and potentially to seek court remedy.

Dr. Adam reminded members of the House Standing Committee on Transport that they have specific responsibilities in reviewing the proposals submitted, namely, to promote the fundamental aspects of Canadian identity and protect the right of Canadians to receive service in the official language of their choice.

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Information

Commissioner's Representatives

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